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Fort Pitt and the Scots: Sir Peter Halkett of Pitfirrane

Posted on 21/04/2016 by John Cairns

Your blogger recently visited Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania to attend an academic conference. As the spelling would suggest, the name was given to the British settlement by a Scotsman, General John Forbes, from Fife, in honour of the elder Pitt. That other Fifer, Andrew Carnegie, is probably the Scot most associated nowadays with the city.

One just needs to visit Pittsburgh to understand the area's strategic significance. The Monongahela and Allegheny rivers join to form the Ohio river, which, eventually linking with the Mississippi, provides access through much of the continent to the Gulf of Mexico.

The point where the rivers converge is surrounded by bluffs. On this point, the French built Fort Duquesne in 1754, one of a series of forts facing the British colonies, at the start of what British Historians call the Seven Years War (known in North America as the French and Indian War), an essentially global war important in the development of the British Empire in North America and India, as well as having a major impact in continental Europe. From the Ohio, the way was open by river through the huge territory claimed by the French as Louisiana. The story is complicated; to explain it in detail would require a lot of time. Suffice it to say that the British saw the Fort as a threat to their colonies, particularly Virginia. There were various adventures against it, leading finally to the British occupation of the area under Forbes in 1758. One such adventure was led by George Washington; another, which failed, was led by James Grant of Ballindalloch, later Governor of British East Florida.

The presence of Grant and Forbes reminds us of the fact that the proportion of Scots in the officer class of the British army was disproportionately large. Further north in the same war, one can note General James Murray, who, with the Fraser Highlanders, played a significant role in the capture of Canada, and became first civil Governor of the British Province of Quebec. Indeed, any casual observation of colonial America in this era turns up numerous Scots officers and colonial governors, such as Robert Dinwiddie, who played a part in the story of Pittsburgh, Gabriel Johnston, James Glen, the Earl of Loudoun, and the Earl of Dunmore.

There is an excellent and informative museum at Fort Pitt. It gave this blogger a proper understanding of the warfare in this part of the Ohio river for the first time. One of the unsuccessful adventures against Fort Duquesne before Forbes finally captured it was led by General James Braddock who died in his failed attack on the French. The commander of the 44th Foot under Braddock was Sir Peter Halkett of Pitfirrane who, with his son, Lieutenant James Halkett, also died in this attempt on the Fort. Both Halketts rate a mention in the exhibition in the museum. But the comment on Sir Peter is rather odd: "A veteran of the 1745 Battle of Prestonpans, near Edinburgh; although born in Scotland, he fought with British troops against Charles Stuart, Scottish pretender to the British throne." This gives a rather misleading twist to Scottish history and seems to suppose that Scotland is not part of Britain. As most readers of this Blog will know "Britain" is not something other than "Scotland" but includes Scotland – no Scotland no Britain. "Scottish" troops are "British" troops. Furthermore, to describe Prince Charles as "Scottish pretender to the British throne" is perfectly absurd. The grandson of James VII and II and his Italian wife, Mary of Modena, and the son of a Polish mother, Maria Clementina Sobieska, Charles was not any more "Scottish" than George I, great grandson of James VI and I. The description in the Museum suggests surprise that Halkett fought against Charles; but in fact only a minority of Scots supported Charles. Most rejoiced at his defeat at Culloden. They saw this as providing security for the Scottish protestant church and protection for limited government in the face of potential royal absolutism. In reality, Charles had just been a pawn of the

French, and the Rebellion a minor sideshow to annoy the British in the war of the Austrian Succession.

There is one interesting thing about Halkett, a professional army officer, and the Jacobite Rebellion worth mentioning here. He was in fact captured at Prestonpans; but he was released on parole on promising not to take up arms for eighteen months. He honoured this undertaking by refusing to answer a summons issued by the Duke of Cumberland in February 1746 to rejoin his regiment, under threat of losing his commission. He commented that the Duke “was master of their commissions but not of their probity and honour”. (See <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1715-1754/member/halkett-peter-1695-1755>.) As his subsequent career showed, the British army continued to value his honour as an officer and a gentleman.

The large, rambling family home of Pitferrane, again in Fife, is now the club house of Dunfermline Golf Club, rather defaced by modern additions. See <https://canmore.org.uk/site/49343/pitferrane-castle>.

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